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SUBJECT: TIBETANS ARGUE OVER A THIRD RINPOCHE AS CALLS FOR A
GORKHALAND STATE CONTINUE

REF: KOLKATA 66

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a March 27-30 visit to Darjeeling and adjoining towns, ConOff spoke with the Tibetan community about the unrest in Lhasa, and attended an enthronement ceremony for a possible Third Reincarnation of the Domogeshi Rinpoche. ConOff also visited the Tibetan Self-Help Center in Darjeeling, which is funded by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. Tibetans around Darjeeling were very aware of the news out of Tibet, and the Tibetan Solidarity Movement has been organizing rallies in the area against the Chinese crackdown in Tibet. Tibetans in W. Bengal are also caught up in current calls by ethnic Nepalis for a separate Gorkhaland state in the Darjeeling area, as Bimal Gurung's Gorkhaland Movement continues to make waves. End summary.

The Diaspora

¶2. (U) During March 27-30, ConOff visited the Darjeeling area of North Bengal, meeting with Tibetan Buddhist monastery administrators, local Tibetan businessmen, and residents. An estimated 120,000 Tibetans live in India, and approximately 7,000-8,000 Tibetans are believed to be living in North Bengal and Northeast India. A sizeable portion of them reside in the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in North Bengal.

¶3. (U) On March 29, ConOff attended an enthronement ceremony for a U.S.-born Third Reincarnation of the Domogeshi Rinpoche, four-year-old Lobsang Jigme Wangchuk, at Samten Choling Monastery in the town of Ghoom. Samten Choling is one of the Tharpacholing monasteries run by the Yellow Sect, a Tibetan Buddhist Sect that is historically allied with the Dalai Lama. The young Third Reincarnation was located in Brooklyn in 2006 after a search organized by Yellow Sect leaders. (Note: The previous/second reincarnation, Kyabje Domo Geshe Rinpoche, was taken prisoner by the Chinese and released in 1961 after repeated requests from the GOI. After his exile from Tibet, the Second Rinpoche moved to India and worked with the Dalai Lama. The Second Rinpoche passed away in 2001. End note.) The enthronement was attended by around 500 local Tibetans and a dozen Western followers of the Second Reincarnation.

¶4. (U) On March 31, at Gaden Chholing Gumba monastery in nearby Pedong, a competing Yellow Sect faction scuffled with Lobsang

Wangchuk's followers over his enthronement claim. While 300 Wangchuk supporters tried to enter the monastery to enthrone him, the rival group claimed that the true successor was Tenzing Jigme Dhendup, who had already been enthroned elsewhere and whom the Dalai Lama supposedly had blessed. Police were called out to enforce a court order obtained by Dhendup's supporters preventing Wangchuk's followers from entering the monastery and holding an enthronement ceremony, and Wangchuk's enthronement did not take place.

15. (U) There are a number of Tibetan monasteries in North Bengal, providing communal bases for local Tibetans to share news and discuss current events, including the recent crackdown by the Chinese government in Tibet. Information about the situation in China spreads more effectively now because of the presence of cell phones and other communication technologies. Tibetans around Darjeeling were quite aware of the unrest and expressed support for their kin. There were also general feelings of frustration with the GOI for not taking a harder stance with China.

Registering Protest

16. (SBU) A number of protests in the region have been organized by the Tibetan Solidarity Movement (TSM), a body supported by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, to draw attention to the Tibet situation. On March 20, around 200 Tibetans left Darjeeling en route to the Nathu-La India-China border crossing in Sikkim, intending to express their support for Tibetans against China. They were stopped by Indian police, however, at the West Bengal-Sikkim border. In response, the Tibetan marchers began a hunger strike. The Secretary of the Sangag Choling Monastery (Dali Gonpa) in Ghoom, Ngawang Tenzin Gyatso (please protect), told ConOff that the hunger strike lasted for three days until the Dalai Lama sent word that it was not necessary to continue. Further marches and demonstrations of support are planned in the coming weeks.

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17. (U) On March 31, the West Bengal and Sikkim sub-committee of the TSM organized a protest march in Siliguri, and made a five-point charter of demands. These included: 1) sending a fact-finding international delegation to Lhasa for inquiry into the March 14 massacre, 2) allowing "free" media to report in Tibet, 3) immediate medical assistance for the victims, 4) release of detained Tibetans in Lhasa, and 5) free movement of people to and from Tibet.

Self-Help Under Government-in-Exile

18. (U) Post spoke with staff at the Tibetan Self-Help Center (TSC) in Darjeeling. The Tibetan Government-in-Exile funds the organization and the more than 600 employees describe themselves as "Tibetan government bureaucrats." They provided a list of over a dozen Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the TSC's regional area of responsibility as well as contacts to other regional Tibetan Self-Help Centers in Kalimpong and Sonada in North Bengal. They stressed that the contacts were only for Tibetan Buddhists, and that many other Buddhist monasteries exist in the region.

Minority Woes

19. (U) Almost every Tibetan that ConOff spoke with stressed that Tibetans have no voice in local politics in the region. They lack voting rights, are a minority in the majority-Nepali community, and say they are left to the whims of the Nepali community agenda. The Tibetans say they support Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM) leader Bimal Gurung - who is demanding a Gorkhaland state - because they lack any other options and because he is immensely popular among the region's Nepalis (reftel).

¶10. (SBU) Gurung's call for a separate state of Gorkhaland is likely to continue until the government relents. Former Chief of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) Subhas Ghising no longer enjoys popular support and even local Tibetans feel Gurung may be less corrupt and provide better services for the people than Ghising did. Ngawang Tenzin Gyatso observed that Gurung's men had pressured Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the area to provide support for the recent strikes in Darjeeling for the Gorkhaland cause. The religious institutions were reluctant to become involved in politics, but could not refuse.

¶11. (U) ConOff witnessed the presence of GJMM everywhere -- from small, isolated, mountainside hamlets to downtown Darjeeling. Carnival style party flags were strung across the streets and from building to building. Most private houses were also flying larger individual party flags. Posters declaring "We Condemn 6th Schedule" and other pro-GJMM graffiti were ubiquitous throughout the region. (Note: Ghising had advocated 6th Schedule, or special tribal status, for Gorkhas in Darjeeling, which was rejected by the GJMM and local Nepalis.) While less prevalent, there were also large posters of Gurung in Darjeeling. In April, GJMM captured the leadership of the local municipality from Ghising's Gorkha National Liberation Front (reftel).

¶12. (U) Comment: While current events in Tibet are overshadowing the in-fighting among Tibetans in eastern India, the standoff between rival Yellow Sect factions may require intervention from higher-ups in the Tibetan Buddhist structure to resolve. As in other parts of India, Tibetans appear to remain outside the political structure, and in N. Bengal they may get caught up in the growing Gorkhaland call. Bimal Gurung, assisted by GJMM secretary Roshan Giri who is rumored to have links to the Maoists in Nepal as well as the criminal underground, is perceived as a ruthless and tough player. Over the past few months, a series of strikes supporting Gorkhaland calls were enforced by the GJMM even though some businessmen and organizations were unenthusiastic. Until a solution to the Gorkhaland demand arrives, instability will likely continue and Tibetans will be caught up in the political situation in Darjeeling.
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